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South Carolina Shipbuilding in the Age of Sail - Part 2

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South Carolina Shipbuilding. . .

How did the vessels built by South Carolina shipwrights compare with those being built elsewhere? It would be hard to imagine that local shipwrights and boatbuilders weren't being influenced by local conditions and preferences and modifying the basic designs so that their vessels accommodated the needs of their customers.

For evidence of this we turn again to the available ship registers. They show that the Carolina-built, ship-rigged (three masted) vessel was, in general, of moderate size, yet larger than ships being built in the other shipbuilding colonies. South Carolina shipwrights were certainly able to build large


ocean-going ships. The 280-ton ship *Queen Charlotte*, built in 1764 by John Emrie, and the 260-ton ship *Atlantic*, built at Port Royal in 1773, are two examples. However, ship-rigged vessels built in South Carolina during this time averaged 180 tons. A ship in the 150- to 200-ton range seems almost the unanimous choice of Carolina shipowners, with more than half of those built in South Carolina in that range. While these ships were of rather moderate size, it may come as a surprise that Carolina shipwrights

turned out ships that were on the average forty percent larger than those being produced in other colonies. From available port records we find that ships built in the other colonies averaged only about 130 tons burthen.

Perhaps the epitome of the South Carolina-built ship was the *Heart of Oak*, built at the Hobcaw yard of John Rose in 1763. Not only did its 180-ton size prove

of an easy draught." An "easy draught" in 1763 could be considerable. Lloyd's Register for 1764 lists her as having a draught of fourteen feet when fully loaded. During the colonial period it was generally accepted that at low tide only twelve feet of water covered the deepest channel through the offshore bar, and in 1748, Governor James Glen noted that "Charles-Town Harbour is fit for all Vessels which do not exceed fifteen feet draught." This meant that the *Heart of Oak*, with its "easy draught," had to be careful indeed when it crossed the bar fully loaded. Rose was a passenger on the *Heart of Oak's* maiden voyage

when it sailed for Cowes on 22 June 1763. He was travelling to England in an attempt to recruit shipwrights to come to Carolina. There can be little doubt that he used the *Heart of Oak* as an example of the excellent shipbuilding materials and craftsmanship available in Carolina. He returned in the *Heart of Oak* in February 1764. His efforts were considered a failure. In April 1763, when the *Heart of Oak* was registered, John Rose listed



TO BE SOLD,
A GOOD SCHOONER,
that will carry about 200 barrels
of rice, or 24 cords of wood, Carolina
built, the frame is sound, and of Live
Oak, the sails in tolerable good order, as
also the rigging, two good grapnels and
cables; the reason of her sale is, that she draws too much
water for the owner's landing, and may be seen once a week
at Mr. Wragg's wharf, by applying to
CROSS & CALVERT.

-- from *The South Carolina Gazette*

typical of the size of locally-built ships, but the quality of its workmanship would be proven over a successful career spanning more than ten years. The *Heart of Oak's* illustrious career began almost immediately after her launching. The S.C. Gazette for 21 May 1763 reported that "The fine new ship *Heart-of-Oak*, commanded by Capt. Henry Gunn, lately built by Mr. John Rose at Hobcaw, came down (to town) two days ago, completely fitted, and . . . 'tis thought she will carry 1100 barrels of rice, be very buoyant, and

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... In The Age Of Sail - Part Two

himself as sole owner, however, by June of that year one fourth of the ship was owned by Henry Laurens who, in 1766, valued his one-quarter interest in the *Heart of Oak* at £4,000. This sum can perhaps be put into perspective by noting that at the same time he valued Mepkin Plantation, his 3,000 acre property on the Cooper River, at £7,000.

One thing is certain, Carolinians had a preference for schooners. South Carolina shipwrights built more schooners than all other types of vessels put together. The ship registers indicate that the two-masted fore-and-aft-rigged schooner, ideal for coastal trading vessels, averaged about twenty

tons burthen and accounted for about eighty percent of the registered South Carolina-built vessels. This appears somewhat astonishing, especially when compared to records from the other colonies where the schooner accounted for only about twenty-five percent of the vessels built. Elsewhere in the American colonies, the one-masted sloop rig was the most popular rig, accounting for roughly one-third of all vessels registered in the colonies.

This penchant for schooners


is perhaps a result of the coastal trade which formed a large part of the commerce in and out of Charleston. In addition to a lively Atlantic and Caribbean trade, Carolinians carried on an extensive and active coastal trade. Rice, indigo, lumber, naval stores, and the other products of the coastal plantations and settlements had

departures for a one year period from June 1765 to June 1766, we find the majority of cruises for schooners involved short coastal runs while sloops were being used for short ocean cruises, such as those to the Caribbean and Bermuda.

As the colonists spread out along the waterways so did the shipbuilding efforts. The registers list construction sites along most of South Carolina's rivers — at places such as Pon Pon, Dorchester, Bull's Island, Dewees Island, Wadmalaw, Combahee, and Pocotaligo. But the major shipbuilding areas centered around Charleston, Beau-

Charleston-Town, Aug. 23, 1776.

To be SOLD at the Vendue-House,
On TUESDAY the Second of OCTOBER next.



THE SCHOONER
THREE FRIENDS,
(Burthen about 115 Barrels of Rice.)

A Well-built Vessel, sails remarkably fast, is well found with Anchors, Cables, Seals, and other Articles for a Coaster. — One-Half of the said Vessel belongs to the Estate of ROBERT HUME, Esq; deceased; and the other Half to WILLIAM PARKER, who will make Titles to the

Purchaser Three Months Credit will be given, paying Interest and giving Security.

OATS & RUSSELL.

— from *The South Carolina Gazette*

to be transported to Charleston for transshipment to England and elsewhere. And, the products from England and Europe that arrived in Charleston had to be distributed back to these colonists who were starved for manufactured goods of all kinds. This coastal trade required small, fast, shallow-draft vessels that were maneuverable enough to sail amongst the coast's sea islands. The small coasting schooners being built by Carolina shipbuilders fit the bill perfectly. Looking at the records of port arrivals and

fort, and Georgetown.

Most shipbuilding in Charleston took place outside the city proper. The three areas near town that became shipbuilding centers were James Island, Shipyard Creek, and Hobcaw.

Although no shipyard sites have been located on James Island, the colonial ship registers indicate a good amount of shipbuilding on the island. Between 1735 and 1772 more than thirty vessels list James Island as their

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Shipbuilding

place of construction in the ship registers. This includes the 130-ton ship *Charming Nancy*, built in 1752 for Charleston merchants Thomas Smith Sr. and Ben Smith.

Shipyard Creek, now part of the naval base near Charleston, was another shipbuilding site during the colonial period. Many of the ships listing Charleston as their place of construction in the ship registers were probably built on Shipyard Creek.

During the last half of the eighteenth century Hobcaw Creek off the Wando River became the colony's largest shipbuilding center, boasting as many as three commercial shipyards in the immediate vicinity. The largest shipyard in the Hobcaw area, indeed in all of colonial South Carolina, was the one started on the south side of the creek in 1753 by Scottish shipwrights John Rose and James Stewart. After making a considerable fortune, Rose sold the yard in 1769 to two other Scottish shipwrights, William Begbie and Daniel Manson. In 1778, Paul Pritchard bought the property and changed its name to Pritchard's Shipyard. During the Revolution the South Carolina Navy Board bought control of the yard and used it to refit vessels of the South Carolina Navy. After the Revolution ownership of the yard reverted to Pritchard and the property stayed in the Pritchard family until 1831.

Another shipwright who owned a yard in the vicinity of Hobcaw Creek during South Carolina's colonial period was

Capt. Clement Lempriere. The exact location of his yard is unknown, but in all likelihood it was near or at Remly Point. And, a 1786 plat of the Hobcaw Creek area reveals the site of the shipyard of David Linn located on the north side of the creek. Linn had been a shipbuilder in Charleston as early as 1744 and purchased the Hobcaw property in 1759.

Georgetown and Beaufort also developed shipbuilding industries during the colonial period. The South Carolina ship registers indicate Georgetown had a thriving shipbuilding industry from 1740 to about 1760. More than thirty vessels list Georgetown as the site of construction during this period including the 180-ton ship *Francis*, built in 1751. The *Francis* was probably built by Benjamin Darling since his was the largest shipyard in Georgetown during this period.

The South Carolina Gazette for 28 September 1765 notes that "within a month past, no less than three schooners [sic] have been launch'd at and near the town of Beaufort, one built by Mr. Watts, one by Mr. Stone, and one by Mr. Lawrence; besides which, a pink stern ship, built by Mr. Black, will be ready to launch there next Monday, and very soon after, another schooner, built by Mr. Taylor, one by Mr. Miller, and one by Mr. Topping; there is also on the stocks, and in great forwardness, a ship of three hundred tons, building by Mr. Emrie; and the following contracted for, to be built at the same place, viz, a

ship of 250 tons, and a large schooner, by Mr. Black; another large ship and a schooner by Mr. Watts; two large schooners, by Mr. Lawrence, and on by Mr. Stone." The ship registers verify this abundance of shipbuilding and indicate a proliferation of construction activity between 1765 and 1774.

It would be wrong to assume that all this shipbuilding was taking place at large commercial shipyards. Shipyards during this period ranged from the well-established yard such as John Rose's on Hobcaw, employing perhaps twenty persons, to the "shade tree" variety where one or two persons built small sloops and schooners without any help and worked elsewhere between construction jobs. And this doesn't include the handyman who built a canoe or small sailing skiff for his own personal use.

While specific records concerning small boat building do not exist, the newspapers of the time are filled with advertisements indicating a wide variety of locally-made watercraft for sale. These small craft virtually littered the local waterways. In 1751, Gov. James Glen noted that "Cooper River appears sometimes a kind of floating market, and we have numbers of canoes, boats and pettiaguas that ply incessantly, bringing down the country produce to town, and returning with such necessary as are wanted by the planters."

(The concluding part of this series will be run in the next Goody Bag.)